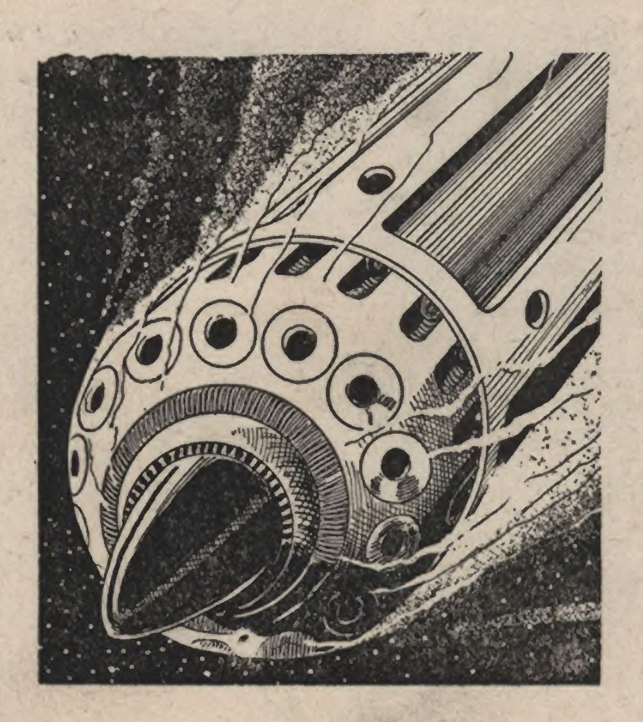
★ Science Fiction Classics ★

No. 1

MARTIAN MARTYRS

By John Coleridge



Published By

COLUMBIA PUBLICATIONS, Inc.

60 HUDSON STREET

New York, N.Y.



MARTIAN MARTYRS

By

John Coleridge

One wing snapped off as if it were a match-stick.

CHAPTER I

WITH his face pressed close to the curved glass of the turbocar, Dik 4M-277 swore softly to himself. Before his eyes and far downward swung the city, a staggering maze of buildings and spans. It was 3004 A.D.

"Grumbling again?" queried Tom 3M-189, his companion who sat beside him in the small compartment.

Dik made no answer, so Tom continued: "I suppose it's the same old subject — you don't like the way the world is run; you're a misfit; you should have been born ten centuries ago; etc. I should think, Dik, that your mind would be sick of reviewing that same thing so long." Tom laughed softly.

The other glared at him. "You might look at this thing as some huge joke, but your mind isn't as analytical and deep-seeing as mine."

Tom again had occasion to laugh. He had teased Dik about his discontented state of mind as long as they had known each other, which had been most of their lives. Together they had studied side by side and grown to manhood.

Dik's periodical "grumbling" and the ensuing arguments often afforded them relaxation and even fun in the stern and disciplined age of 3004 A.D. Ten centuries before, the rule of earth fell into the hands of scientists, because their inventions and discoveries had gradually made them all-powerful; more especially that they hoarded their secrets from political parties. All mankind obeyed the scientific ruling power in the new regime. Bigotry and political machinations vanished. They had fashioned a new world and a new life. It consisted of work, study, and the thirst for more knowledge. Few, very few, were dissatisfied with it, for it was pleasant and easy to live. But Dik and Tom, the latter to lesser degree, were "throw-backs" with atavistic tendencies that would have fitted them better in the year 1940 A.D., when all men were "free" to do as they pleased and get away with it.

After some moments of silence, as the turbo-car hummed along its span a thousand feet above ground through and between the canyons of buildings, Tom turned his head.

"Look here, Dik. For every moment you have thought of that, as many individuals in the 20th century had wished they could live in our well-ordered times. Why, do you know, in those old times it was possible for a man to be unemployed and actually starve to death? You're just wasting energy, grumbling against our life. What does it bring you?"

"A grand headache," answered Dik. "But seriously, Tom, it wasn't exactly of that I was thinking. It's this meeting we're on our way to now. Take my word for it, there is a Dark Moon in it somewhere. For instance...."

"Did you say," interrupted Tom, "a moment ago that you had an analytical mind? I'd call it a suspicious one."

"Listen to me," went on Dik earnestly. "Did you ever stop to think that we have been schooled for three years in spacenautics and yet none of us have ever seen a space-ship?"

"We have the stratosphere and troposphere rocket ships, and that was our main study and training."

"Well and good. But why the spacenautics? Would you take one of those ships out into space?"

"Well, hardly," Tom answered, puzzled at the other's meaning.

"I'll tell the stars you wouldn't! There you are — we learn all there is to know of the plants from air density and gravity, from space-charts to meteor repulsion screens, and by the blessed moon, neither you nor I nor anyone else in the world knows of an existing ship that can traverse space. Then how can you say that there isn't more to it than we can guess?"

"I can, though," returned Tom for the sake of the argument. "Suppose the Sci-tri* has secretly invented such a ship and trained us for the purpose?"

Dik nodded. "But what has happened to all those others who have been trained in our school for the past — let me see — three score years? Has anybody ever heard of them again?"

"That's a foolish question, Dik. You know how we are shifted around by the Sci-tri. It's their system of doing things. It might happen to you and me, that we would be separated and not see each other for years. I distinctly know of such a case. A friend of a fellow I met years ago went through spacenautics and today he is captain of a troposphere ship between London and New York."

"All right," assented Dik. "But that one case does not account for the thousands who have vanished. What ever happened to my father? He was also chosen for this years ago. Where is he now? You know that I would be laughed at as a sentimental fool if I were to ask the Section Recorder. Besides, all the answer I would get would be that my father had commendably done his duty.

***Note: "Sci-tri" was the official abbreviation for "Tribunal of Science," the ruling power of Earth.**

"That's what I'm so against in our life today," went on Dik moodily. "We are to show no family feeling of any kind. Our lives are forfeit to the State with no questions asked. It's unnatural — cruel!"

Tom would have gone into his usual tirade. That last curt statement had often made him tell the other of the benefits of the age in which they lived. He would recall history of earlier times when frightful wars made a shambles of cities, when people were slaughtered like rats. He would tell of political graft, of money tyrants who lived in luxury when thousands died of starvation; of the hodge-podge of finance that swept nations into bankruptcy. Those things were cruel! None of this ever happened under the sage rule of the Sci-tri — but this time Tom desisted. Dik's words had brought a vague unrest in his own heart.

THE turbo-car sped along. It was an express with few stops. Blinding fast though it was, there was no chance of accident, for indefatigable robot controls could make no mistake. The spans of the turbo-cars, which were the standard intercity transport vehicles, honeycombed the entire conglomerate of a hundred square miles of city structures.

The two youths sat silent for some time. Both watched the scenery as it swept beyond the windows as though they saw it for the first time. But they were not taking particular notice of the things they had seen from birth onward; they were thinking.

A bell rang. Mechanically they fastened the wide belts that dangled at the sides of the seats. A minute later their bodies strained at the belts as he brakes were applied.

An amplifier in the ceiling droned out: "Station Red-10. Change for 23, 54, and 60. Main transfer on Station Blue-5 in two minutes."

When the bell rang again, they unloosed the belts. Some rode with them always fastened, but the majority did not like their bodies so tightly harnessed. Tom even pushed away the shoulder straps. He was large and they chafed his flesh. He looked over to Dik.

"It won't be long now; next station is ours. What do you think we'll get — positions, ships berths, a fancy diploma, or connections that will separate us?"

"I wish I knew," muttered Dik. "But I can't help think it will be none of those — perhaps something we can't foresee."

"What a pessimist!" cried Tom. "One would think we're going to be dissected, by the way you say that. Cheer up! We might get a nice appointment. We didn't learn all that but for some good use. Think of it, captain of some stratosphere ship, soaring the grand skies — bankits* — recreation — women. What more can we ask?" He slapped his hands together in keen anticipation.

Dik looked at the cheerful Tom with the ghost of a grin on his cherubic face. "Your inclinations are very common."

"Well, why not?" countered Tom quickly. "I can never be a scientist or intellectual. So I must be common. Call me what you like, but I just thought of that girl I met — you remember, at the Club Orion? If I ever get to be a captain, with a captain's bankits, she'll hear from me, you can bet on it. Hair, Dik, like spun gold; eyes a dream; and wild! She's as wild as — let me think — as a mustang, and..."

"Now what's a mustang?" Dik broke in.

"Oh, we had it in ancient history of the Capitalistic Age. There's another name for them...a horse! That was the animal the ancients used for transportation. They had to be broken into harness. Well, this girl is wild and untamed like that..."

But Dik was laughing heartily, bringing a sheepish grin to Tom's face.

The signal bell clanged again and they strapped themselves in. The turbo-car hissed in a rapid braking.

"Tom, I'm a commoner too," said Dik. "But sometimes I feel — different!"

Then the robot voice droned softly: "Station Red-14. Take elevator 22 for Sci-tri. Change for..." etc.

They got up from their seats. An automatic control opened the door of the vehicle, and they stepped out upon the platform of the station. Through the great throng of the terminal, they made their way toward the numerous elevators. Here at the hub of world control, the red-uniformed guards of the Sci-tri were everywhere in great number.

They hadn't taken a dozen steps when one approached them and asked politely, "Credentials, gentlemen."

After a close scrutiny of the papers, the guard turned on his heel with a "Follow me, please."

They stepped into an elevator. Down it whisked with breathless speed. The bright lights went out and Dik and Tom

---

*Note: "bankits" were the medium of exchange, being paper notes whose value never fluctuated.

stood stiffly in the soft blue glow of an overhead lamp. They knew that it was for the purpose of searching them for weapons; the Sci-tri took no chances. The scientist rulers knew the weaknesses of human nature and occasionally had trouble on their hands. It was always stamped out completely, with cold efficiency.

IN A few seconds, the bright lights again flashed on and shortly after the elevator came to a stop. The guard led the way. It was quite thrilling to the two youths, for it was the first time in their lives that they were in the Sci-tri center. The term Sci-tri had come to be synonymous with "power," and called for awe and respect.

With not a little trepidation, they followed the guard. He led them to a great door of metal which had neither latch nor hinge, yet it opened at their approach. Ahead stretched a long corridor whose vaulted ceiling lost itself in dim height that reared above hanging lights. On each side were numbered doors set in the glistening walls. At one door, the guard held up a metal object and flicked its tap control; the door opened silently.

"In there," motioned the guard. "I leave you. Good-day, gentlemen."

A trifle fearfully, Dik and Tom walked in, looking at each other and asking with their eyes, "What now?"

An amplifier above them spoke: "Please enter the door upon your left." They lost little time in doing so, for action was far better than standing in that oppressive silence. They had no sooner entered this door when, with a shout, they both ran forward — for there were the others of their class — six young men.

Eagerly they all exchanged greetings. They had not been together for a month and each wanted to know what the other had done during their furlough. In the midst of this noisy and exciting reunion, a deep voice called for silence. They knew better than to disobey.

"Gentlemen," said the voice. "It is the pleasure of the Sci-tri at this appointed hour to see you personally. Please enter the forum from the door numbered 3A."

It was the great moment — to see the famed and mysterious Sci-tri! The eight youths fell into line behind one another and entered the forum. A series of steps leading downward at a slight angle ran between many rows of seats with desks be-

fore them. For a moment, they thought that they were entering another classroom — but upon looking ahead and upward, they saw a rotunda of burnished metal set with a massive judge's bench that extended the entire width of the forum. Behind the bench sat the members of the Sci-tri.

The body of youths stopped as one and saluted as they gazed on with conflicting emotions. No one had prepared them for the shock of seeing the fifteen Sci-tri scientists. Fifteen men — yet how different from men!

So conspicuous was the largeness of their heads, that the first impression was that they were heads alone. But closer scrutiny revealed the human frames that supported them. Not a vestige of hair was upon the heads. Like pale, damp marbles, they shone in the lights of the forum. Their cranial capacity was easily twice a normal man's What marvel of scientific achievement was here manifested?

CHAPTER II

"GENTLEMEN, be seated," spoke a stentorian voice from above.

Still shaken with awe, the youths sat down as if in a dream. They had always thought the Sci-tri to consist of men such as they. Never in all their lives had anyone said otherwise.

Dik noticed immediately that the Sci-tri members had no nameplates*, and his eyes narrowed at this.

"Gentlemen," the voice resumed, "the Record informs us that you are students from Branch 6 of the Air School and that you are technicians of spacenautics, three full years completed and degrees conferred. Splendid work, and the Sci-tri takes this opportunity to commend you. We are proud of you!"

With that, the rulers of earth arose. An audible gasp came from the group in the forum as they likewise arose and saluted. Those massive heads were not out of proportion to the bodies, for they were attached to stalwart frames of muscle eight feet tall! Why, here was ten thousand years of evolution!

The stentorian voice spoke again as all seated themselves.

"There is much to be said. Make yourselves comfortable.

---

*Note: every person on earth had a pliant chain of light metal around his neck which bore a small round plate inscribed with the wearer's name and number. It could not be removed (violence was the only way) without severe penalty.

And now hear the words and commands of the Sci-tri. None of you could be common workers, nor yet scientists, because of your natures. You have within your bosoms that ancient spark of "adventure." It is an atavistic complex, demanding action. There is no outlet for such complexes in our world today — except one. You have been chosen, gentlemen, to venture out into space!"

Dik looked at Tom and his eyes said, "I told you so."

The voice went on: "It is the wish of the Sci-tri to enlighten you further. Fifty-nine years ago, the first ship was sent out. How successful it was in landing on another planet, we do not know. And since then many others have left. None have been heard from..."

Dik leaped to his feet, his face flushed, fists white at the knuckles. He was about to speak with burning words when the stentorian voice sternly commanded him to sit down.

"Dik 4M-277, it will please the Sci-tri for you to control your emotions. We know exactly what is in your mind. Have the patience to hear us out. Your words would have been to the effect that it seems a wanton destruction of human life to send out more ships when so many have failed.

"Here is our answer: it is necessary. Permit us to elucidate. You men know from your studies that forty miles above earth is an invisible and thin layer of ozone, the isotope of oxygen. It is the phenomenal purpose of this layer which completely surrounds our world to shield us from a great deal of the sun's ultra-violet rays. Were it not for the ozone, animal life as we know it, could not exist — and were we humans struck with the full force of the rays that the layer absorbs, we would be burnt to a cinder.

"It was a century ago that the scientists found, to their amazement, that the ozone layer was strangely dissipating itself! All our science cannot stop it. Careful measurements revealed that the human race has but a short century more of life left on this planet. The only alternative to death is migration to other planets!"

The voice stopped to let this astounding statement saturate the brains of the youths in the forum.

"We as yet know little of the other planets, and have no idea if they will support life. For fifty-nine years now, the Sci-tri, keeping knowledge of the doom from the masses, has tried its best to send exploration ships to our sister worlds. Our purpose is humanitarian. Now would you, Dik 4M-277, or the

rest of you, say that this was wanton destruction? Can you now realize that you will be martyrs to a great cause? Upon your success, as well as that of other ships, depends that welfare of billions of lives. Successful space navigation must be accomplished.

"Up to the present time, we attribute our failure to the inadequacy of rocket motive power to traverse space. It is a stupendous task to bridge space, gentlemen — a well-nigh impossible task. We have already sent out 235 ships — none have we knowledge of once they left earth. But we have lately entertained high hopes that we will soon succeed. It is a new method of propulsion that gives us such hope, and your ship will be the first to use it.

"We will give you now a brief description of it. Later you will be trained thoroughly how to run it. Our present rocket engines are not powerful enough to send ships across the void, apparently. They are highly successful in our airships, but that is out of comparison. The new ship is not unlike a stratosphere ship. It will leave earth's atmosphere by rocket explosion, but once out in space, it will continue its journey by the radiation pressure of the sun's rays!

"For this purpose, it is specially equipped with telescoped arms which extend from equal points of the ship's stern. Motors will operate the arms and push them to their full length. Then sheets of metal foil will be drawn along them by cable guides. The ship will then have metallic "wings" whose total area will be almost a square mile! The beating of the sun's rays on this will push the ship forward through frictionless space, stabilized by a gyroscope. The power is unlimited, thus allowing the precious rocket fuel to be used for landing purposes.

"The Sci-tri is confident that this ship will traverse space successfully. Your destination will be Mars. Other ships, with the same motive power, will also be sent to other planets in the near future. When you have landed, it shall be your duty to radio back to us the conditions. There will be much hardship, but the glory will ring forever!

"Gentlemen, do you wish to resign from this expedition?"

DIK sat flushed of face. In that age, there were small opportunities to indulge in daring deeds and bravery. This was the grand chance, and he would be the last to shrink from it. He bounded to his feet and shouted that he was as eager to go

as any man could be. An answering shout from the others made the decision unanimous.

"The Sci-tri is proud of you," said the voice. "Farewell and good luck!"

Thereupon a curtain fell from the ceiling, shutting off the Sci-tri rotunda from the forum. Down the aisle strode a man in the uniform of a guard. He was a man well on in years, yet his lithe body cast age from him. An overhead amplifier buzzed to life.

"Gentlemen, Commander Jarl 6P-88 of the Intelligence is before you. He will take charge of you from now on. The Sci-tri transfers to him full authority. Your families will be informed of your departure from State life in the usual way. From this moment on, your connection with the world at large has ceased."

The youths saluted Commander Jarl and, at his order, strode from the room in stiff formation. They were taken to the private turbo-car system of the Sci-tri, and from there were transferred to an airport.

With a thunder of rockets, the stratosphere ship hurtled into the night sky. Where they were going, none of them knew.

Tom looked across at Dik.

"Well, Star-eater, what do you think of it?"

The other fumbled with his fingers.

"Funny thing, Tom, but now that I've had a few moments to think it over, I feel queer about it. It doesn't seem such a grand martyrdom after all. I think there's a Dark Moon in it somewhere."

Tom threw up his hands and cried, "Another Dark Moon!"

"I wasn't wrong about the first one, was I?" pursued Dik.

"Just a lucky guess. You've been Dark Mooning so many things that it's against the law of averages not to guess correctly a few times."

"The whole thing is, Tom, that your mind isn't as anal..."

"Please," burst in the other. "Let's not go into that again."

Dik nodded his head with a smug expression of contentment on his face, as though he had won the argument. They remained silent for the rest of the voyage.

A sudden jar told them that the stratosphere ship was preparing for a landing. The drumming of the rockets became louder, concentrated at the nose of the ship. At last the rocket noises ceased. Then came the hum and throb of electric motors pushing out the landing wings. Even this sound died, and in

utter silence, the great ship cleaved the air for its landing. Then a new sound came to their ears. It was the base landing siren, clearing the field for the mammoth of the upper air. Like some dying gargantuan monster, it shrieked its warning.

They stepped from the ship into the cold, frosty air of early morning. The others of their class joined them from other compartments. All about them stretched the mazes that bespoke a mighty metropolis.

Commander Jarl hustled them along to an eating room and supplied their wants. Then a short turbo-car ride brought them to a long, low building that was patroled with numerous guards with Sci-tri uniforms. Inside the building, they were assigned rooms in pairs and told they could sleep till noon. All were tired and went to bed promptly.

At noon a bell clanged them awake. They were ushered into a great mess hall where hundreds of other youthful Air School students like themselves, were partaking of food. After the meal, Commander Jarl spoke to them and outlined their course of training, which would take many weeks.

They had seen the new space-ship. It was a dream of mechanical and scientific perfection. Weeks passed in thorough training in its mysteries. They grew to love it, for it was to be their last connection with life.

The crew was to consist of nearly two hundred, each having strict duties. A youth by the name of Lon 3M-883 was appointed captain, having rated highest in the final examinations. Everyone liked him. He was of slight build, but known to have amazing physical prowess.

LON had been in the same class as Dik and Tom and had long sensed their close companionship. He had the foresight not to separate them in their duties aboard the ship. He detailed them to work side by side in the engine room. A friendship sprang up between the three youths while yet on earth, and before the final departure, they were inseparable pals.

The weeks went by, and finally Commander Jarl announced the day appointed for departure. Feverish hours of preparation constituted the remaining time. Supplies had to be stored—oxygen tanks, food, fuel, and other equipment in such huge quantities that it seemed the ship could hardly hold it.

One thing had puzzled Dik for many weeks. He confided his suspicions to Lon and Tom and held their interest with

his speculations. The world in general had always rumored that the Sci-tri had a secret laboratory so immense and wonderful that it defied description. But no one knew where it was. Some had guessed it to be in the Amazon jungles, and others in equally outlandish places.

But it took Dik's inquisitiveness to reveal that they were right in it!—and a number of shrewd guesses made it fairly certain that they were in the heart of Siberia!

"You see, fellows," finished Dik, "the reason we were brought here so mysteriously in the dead of night, is because they want no one to suspect that in Siberia lies the secret laboratory of the Sci-tri. Mark my word, there's a flock of Dark Moons in this, and I'm going to find out all I can before we leave earth."

He was as good as his word. The night before their grand take-off, Lon and Tom waited for Dik in his room, anxiously wondering what had happened to him. He had vanished into thin air after the evening meal. Neither of them wanted to raise a general alarm, for it might go bad for Dik. The breaking of disciplnary rules meant severe punishment—and the treason of spying on Sci-tri affairs would merit instant death!

It was nine o'clock when Lon again looked at the time. Anxiety was written all over his face. "Do you think he has... deserted—escaped somehow?"

"No," answered Tom quickly. "Not Dik. I know him too well to think he would skip and leave us without a word."

"This is a big thing, Tom," said Lon, referring to the trip in space, about which they had previously been talking. "Look at my hands—they're shaking! Tomorrow we leave—out into space! Out into that emptiness...something gone wrong ...the ghastly cold...hideous death..."

Tom put a comforting hand to the youthful captain's shoulder. "Don't talk like that, Lon! We must control our emotions —and our imaginations! It's dangerous—yes, it's a big thing ...a fearful thing!"

The door softly opened. Dik slunk in quietly, closed the door carefully, and then faced them with a mirthless grimace.

As the other two stared at him in relief that he was safe, and in perturbation at his strange expression, Dik slid into a chair. He rubbed his hands, for the night air had been cold. Then he leaned forward and whispered tensely: "I saw it!"

"Saw what?" asked Tom.

"The laboratory!"

"What!" cried the other two in unison, leaning forward.

"It's astounding," began Dik. "Of course, I had only a long-distance view of it, but I saw enough. You've seen Universal — well, that doesn't come within a stone's throw of this place for machinery and activity. But aside from that, I saw something that nearly made me lose my perch. I mentioned before that I thought it strange that a base should have a metal wall around it. Why should it? It set me to thinking. It made me think that this was the Sci-tri secret laboratory. Since then, I've studied the buildings. The Mechanics Building, which extends the entire width of the spacenautics headquarters, is extremely high — so high that I figured there must be something behind it that the Sci-tri wanted none of us to see. Just this evening, I decided to test my theory, so I sneaked to the Mechanics Building and climbed it by means of its corner carvings..."

"Holy comets!" exclaimed Tom. "At the constant risk of your life, either from falling or being shot down by a Sci-tri guard!"

"I suppose I did take a risk," shrugged Dik indifferently. "But it was worth it. It took me an hour and a half to get to the roof. I crossed the flat top, lay down on my stomach in the cold and darkness, and peered down on that mysterious other side that no one sees.

"There, down in a little valley not far away, I saw a city in a glass bubble, it seemed. I can't well describe it.

"But here is the important thing, that which made me forget the cold and risk: I saw not just a few, but thousands of supermen like the members of the Sci-tri!"

"Thousands? That's odd!" commented Tom.

"Odd!" cried Dik vehemently. "Why, I'd lay a month's bankits to it there is a Dark Moon in it somewhere."

Tom waved an eloquent hand. "There he goes Dark Mooning again. Why, I suppose they are reserve members of the Sci-tri, probably that's all."

"Listen, you fools!" continued Dik. "Can't you see that there is some sinister significance in that? My mind has already anal..."

Lon burst out laughing. "Now it's the analytical mind again. Sorry, Dik; I can't listen tonight. As your soon-to-be captain, I order you to bed. Tomorrow is our big day."

He saluted them and left the room.

CHAPTER III

THE last-minute preparations were made just as the sun sank behind the low hills in the far distance. The great space-ship was in its specially constructed cradle a mile from the city. With a last farewell to the Sci-tri guards and to Commander Jarl, the massive lock was swung into place.

In the pilot room, Lon and his ten assistants sat at their boards. Their lips were grim. A glistening sweat covered the captain's forehead. When the signal clanged, he and his men bent tensely over the controls.

Outside, it seemed the distant hills reverberated the thunderous roar as the giant rocket tubes belched blue flame. The ship jerked from its cradle, threw its nose upward at a slight angle, and thundered away from the ground. Its course took it over the city where thousands watched it climb into the sky like a comet. Those thousands were exiles, isolated from the rest of the world — they would never have the chance to tell others of the space-ships that periodically left earth and were never heard from again.

In the ship, many hearts quaked — not for fear of death, but for awe at the stupendousness of their project. Out into space — to a new world!

Tom and Dik and one other had charge of a separate engine compartment. It was their task to watch the engines jealously and to keep the fuel running smoothly. Calls came in constantly from the control room. The orders had to be carried out with deadly precision. After many agonizing minutes, Lon's voice came over the speaking tube from the control room.

"Boys, we've made it — we're out of the atmosphere!"

All over the ship there were shouts of joy, and many capered in relief. It was well understood by all that take-off and landing were the most dangerous events of a space voyage. At that moment of gladness over the successful departure from earth, none gave a thought to that worst of all dangers — the landing. That, being far in the future, was forgotten for the time being.

Then many hours passed in the task of giving the bird of space her cyclopean wings of metal foil. Here and there difficulties arose, but none so great that they could not be surmounted. The rocket power had been shut off entirely and the ship sped away from earth at a constant velocity of a dozen miles a second. The telescoped arms were slowly extended by

electric motors, till they radiated from the ship like the strands of a giant cobweb. Then all hands were called to help unroll the thin foil and feed it to the cable guides which slowly pulled it out onto the long spokes.

The three mathematical adepts ran through long calculations in the meantime, so that when the report came that the wings were fixed into place, the spokes could immediately be turned so as to get the most push from the sun's rays. Captain Lon breathlessly watched the velocity needle to see it gradually climb the scale as the metal foil wings took the full force of light-pressure.

* * * * *

Weeks passed. The monotony of the voyage brought a certain callousness to the crew. They began to accept the strangeness as natural, and thought little of death. They spoke of things earthly and of earthly pleasures and at times conjectured what the new world would be like.

Eighty-three days out, the first catastrophe came. The repulsion screens which side-tracked meteors had up till that time worked satisfactorily, protecting the ship from collision, although the metal wings had become pockmarked with thousands of holes, some a dozen feet in diameter.

It was during the "night" period that it happened. The sleeping quarters were against the hull, completely sealed from the inner engine and supply rooms — thus the engines and supplies were amply protected. Better, the designers had thought, that a few lives be lost and the engines saved, than the engines lost and all destroyed.

A meteor crashed into the sleeping chambers, just grazing the hull enough to buckle the plates and let the air out. The shock was felt throughout the ship. The watch sounded a general alarm. Lon was the first one there and looked through the fused quartz peep with horror. Seven men had been sleeping in the room that lost its oxygen. Seven corpses, frozen and bloated, now floated somewhere out in space, sucked out by the escaping air. Everyone on the ship came to look at the chamber of death and left with a chill in their hearts. The Grim Reaper had paid his first visit.

Lon made an investigation, questioning the repulsion screen detail. They, three having been on duty during the collision, proved that it had not been negligence on their part. It was obvious then that the meteor had been a terribly large one and that they were extremely fortunate to have merely been

grazed by it. A head-on crash would have splintered the entire ship.

On the eighty-ninth day, preparations were made for the deceleration of the ship. The great wings were drawn in on their winches. The telescoped arms were pulled in by the motors. Then the nose rockets were made to boom forth mightily, day after day. Lon made his calculators check and recheck constantly on their rate of deceleration. Their lives depended on their accuracy.

On the ninety-third day, the speed had been retarded to the proper degree and the air-wings were swung out. Soon they touched the fringes of atmosphere and the great ship quivered like a live thing. Lon and his pilots worked with frenzy, calling for more and more power from the engine room. The titanic blasts of the nose rockets ate up the fuel eagerly, and the engine detail began to worry if they would have enough.

Lon found a few seconds to look down at the red terrain looming far below, rushing at them. His heart pounded. If only to live a few minutes on the sand of another world! It would be worth death. To have crossed space...to have felt the terrifying emptiness...to have the grand thrill of landing on Mars and looking up at Earth as a star — it would be worth anything!

The huge ship fluttered downward uncertainly, for the pilots were encountering new air conditions. It plunged, then swung horizontally, still possessed of a terrific speed. Again and again the nose rockets blasted forth. Then it could be delayed no longer — they must touch ground. It was level and bare, like a desert, but even its thick cushion of sand could not soften the crashing descent of the space-ship. It struck with such force that it burrowed part way underground and swung sideward so quickly that one wing snapped off as though it were a match-stick. The red dust of Mars swirled in clouds around it.

DIK shook his head. He felt his arms and legs. Something warm was running down his face. He wiped it away with his hand and saw that it was red. He managed to get to his feet, although for a while he could not take a step. His head spun.

He finally cleared his eyes from blood and mist and saw, through a large rip in the wall, others trying to rise, and still others lying quietly in pools of blood. Hastily, he looked for

Tom — then he saw him lying against a column of tubes. He rushed over to him, lifted his head and chafed his hands violently.

After some moments of feverish work, Tom opened his eyes. He grinned weakly.

"All right, Dik. I can make it," he said in a weak whisper.

In a few minutes, both felt nearly normal and none the worse for their experience. They fell to the rescue work and revived several others — but there were many who would never rise again.

Having done their share in the engine compartments, they hastily decided to make their way to the control room.

"No use, Dik," said Tom, after trying vainly to force the main door between the stern and the central corridor. "This thing is wedged tight. It seems that the hull is pressing down on it. We're trapped back here, I guess."

"Not while I have this," shouted Dik, who had been rummaging behind a motor. He held up a metal-torch. "We can't burn through the walls any place, but the door is of softer stuff."

The two of them held the torch and lit its fuse. A sparkling, humming white flame shot to the metal door and quickly melted it away. Then they had to wait till the heat dissipated before they could crawl through the hole that had been burned When Dik went through, he was followed by Tom and several others of the engine detail who wanted to see the front of the ship, to search for particular friends.

It was a shambles. They made their way forward. In one compartment they found several dead and others moaning with pain. Only one was here on his feet. But Tom and Dik did not linger; they wanted to get to the pilot compartments. They breathed hard as they wound their way through increasing debris and turned their eyes from horrible sights.

Only once was there speech, when Tom said hoarsely: "I hope Lon's all right. He certainly did his best."

It had been the fore part of the ship that had struck most violently. The metal plates of the hull were here bent and twisted like crumpled paper. Blood ran down the grooved floor from mangled bodies. It was ghastly.

Finally they burst into the captain's cabin. It seemed that none had survived the terrific impact. Amongst the chaos of the control boards lay a pile of bodies — a heap of gore. It

was impossible to distinguish one from the other. Dik staggered at the horrible sight and closed burning eyes.

Then they noticed that the hull had been completely split open to one side, a rent ten feet long and half as wide. Tom put a trembling hand to his throat.

"We're breathing Martian air!" he muttered chokingly.

Then more of the engine detail and some of the fuel and supply detail burst into the room to stop and choke out incoherent words. Tom recovered his nerves and began to issue orders. At the sound of his voice, willing hands began to untangle the bodies to see if any were yet alive, although it seemed impossible that such could be. Dik and Tom fell to with the rest, ever searching and yet loath to see the slight body of Captain Lon in that heap of flesh.

Suddenly there was a distinct sound from outside the hull, as if someone or something were trying to climb through the gash. All eyes turned to the spot in bewildered apprehension. Then Dik and Tom leaped forward.

Framed in the yawning rent appeared Lon's head, and then his body. He was climbing in from the outside!

He leaped lightly to the floor.

"Terrible, isn't it!" were his first words.

"Yes—but Lord! We were looking for you in that," stammered Tom, pointing to the dead.

"Strangest thing ever happened to me," explained Lon, who seemed to be the calmest of them all. "When the crash came, I just closed my eyes and waited for the end. I felt myself floating in the air. I thought what a pleasant thing death was! Then, next moment, I felt a jar and opened my eyes to find myself in a cloud of red dust, outside the ship! I couldn't realize at first that I was alive."

He stopped, out of breath.

"Just catapulted right out through that breech," added Dik. "What perfect timing that was! If you had hit a wall instead of soft sand, you wouldn't have lived to tell it."

"How are the others?" asked Lon anxiously.

"Terrible!" answered Tom. "From what we've seen, there'll be just a handful alive."

Then followed the trying task of bringing a semblance of order amidst the chaos. They made a place for the wounded and detailed men to care for them. Food and water was distributed, and a check-up made on damage. None had time to think of the fact that they were on another world.

The Martian night came upon them, cold and dark, and still they labored to bring normal conditions. The lesser gravity allowed them to work long before inexorable fatigue prostrated them one by one.

The final check-up had revealed only forty-four alive. Of these, eighteen were practically unharmed; three of the injured had no chance of recovery.

Such was the landing on Mars.

CHAPTER IV

MANY weeks passed after that eventful day of the ship's crash. Many strange things came to pass in that time. The atmosphere proved to be permanently fit for their lungs. The lesser gravity played many tricks on them before they learned the new art of walking. The radio, apparently unharmed, was set up and signals sent to Earth, to which, much to their bewilderment, there was no answer. For days, they tried to contact Earth till Lon shook his head and attributed its failure to some injury beyond repair.

When they had established a fairly efficient organization, Lon sent out exploring parties to learn more about the new world. He himself, with Tom and Dik, set out early one morning. They chose a low range of hills to the north as their destination. They reached it in late afternoon. Here they found many things to interest them — verdure unlike any on earth, short scrub with pulsating leaves and undulating stems, mounds of green lace-leaves that palpitated as though able to leap and run, and other things.

They saw animal life, but only in fleeting glimpses — small things that scurried to cover in holes. They wandered on in the miniature forest.

A shout from Tom in the lead brought the others close to him. They all peered down into a little gully in which lay the twisted remains of some sort of large vehicle.

When they neared the battered wreck, ejaculations of surprise escaped their lips — it was an earth space-ship!

They circled the ruins in great wonder. Lon called to them when he found an opening convenient for them to crawl through. Excitedly they entered the ship. Everything was covered with red dust. Bleached bones scattered about told a silent story of a fatal landing, with probably no survivors.

They spoke in hushed whispers in the death-like stillness of the ship, conjecturing how long it had lain forgotten here

on Mars. How long ago had the Sci-tri sent it to its doom? How many more ships might be scattered over the wastes of Mars, they could only surmise. No doubt many, too, floated through space, huge coffins that had lost their direction, inhabited by frozen corpses.

They were preparing to leave, depressed by the scene, when something caught Tom's eye. At his feet in a heap of shattered bones was a small metal cylinder. He picked it up and wiped it free of dust. Upon it was etched in bold letters: "Open and read. It is for all eyes to see these words."

The one end unscrewed to reveal a roll of aluminum foil, on which had been scratched the following message:

To whomever reads this:

My name is Buk 6M-432. In the year 2991 I left Earth in this space-ship with two hundred and forty companions. This trip being against my wishes, I preserve what I have to say for others. I am writing this en route, ninety days out from Earth.

A group of scientists upon Earth calling themselves the Sci-tri have ruled Earth (through different generations) for ten centuries. They achieved greatness when they wrested the ruling power from the ruthless, ignorant and depraved and put it in the hands of Intelligence.

But the common failing of Mankind took seed. The lust for power sprang to life, and a most diabolical and heinous plan was conceived whereby their lust could be gratified. Their plan was a scientific "Utopia" in which the masses of humanity would have no part. Wholesale murder was not wise, as the mobs of Earth had yet the greater balance of power.

About a century ago, the plan sprang into being when one of the Sci-tri succeeded in creating a superman, an advanced evolutionary creature, in the laboratory. Blinded to the good example of nine centuries of peaceful rule, the Sci-tri suddenly became corrupt and took over the new plan in secret.

It was then the new system began. Millions were shifted around until family ties were lost. All potentially dangerous characters, of which we who have been doomed to fly from Earth are the members, were singled out first. The Sci-tri decided to stamp out our breed entirely, leaving only the most spiritless of humanity to deal with.

They concocted the story of the diminishing ozone belt and made us feel like martyrs, trying to save a doomed world. Would to God the truth were known by all!

Cold fact is my sponsor. It so happened that when I was a young man during my days in the Air School, I was assigned to fly a stratosphere ship alone on a trial flight, from Berlin to Tokyo. Something went wrong. I crashed in the wilderness of Siberia. But I lived through it and found the almost mythical laboratory and stronghold of the once benevolent Sci-tri. Here, too, by methods which concern me only, I learned of the plan of the Sci-tri—to make a world of supermen!

Why did I not shout it to the world?—because I was captured and put aboard this space-ship, then ready to leave. I told my story to the men on this ship, but their hearts were filled with martyrdom, and their minds with the subtle praises of the wily Sci-tri and they thought me mad.

In three centuries, by their plans, the world will be in the control of the supermen, and humanity will either be killed off or subjugated to slavery. The only hope for the continuance of our race is discovery of their secret plans and destruction of their stronghold in Siberia—a glass-covered city in which the supermen are created and await the day they can sally forth and conquer the world.

I do not know if these words will ever be read. But if some ship manages to land safely on Mars, perhaps a living hand will pick this message from among my bones and know the doom that nearly drove me mad.

The radio which is supposed to relay important information to earth is a worthless contraption, another part of their diabolical hoax. I write to an empty future, for regardless of who reads this, nothing can be done about it. Ship after ship will land here on Mars and on the other planets, ostensibly seeking a new home for humanity—actually flying to crashing death, for the Sci-tri well know that no space-ship can successfully land on other worlds by rocket power.

We are nearing Mars; its red face is looming larger as the hours pass. We will land—we will crash—in a week. Lately the men have suffered a change of heart, for the fuel is running far short, and they have forgotten the pride that sent them into space. They believe me now—but fools! It is too late! Had we turned back early enough. . . .

But no use thinking of that. I have finished my tale, and will soon seal this message in the cylinder so that it will withstand the landing. Can I hope that by the reading of this, the menace of the supermen is gone?—that some unforeseen Providence will yet strike a blow against the corrupt Sci-tri?

(signed) Buk 6M-432.

TOM and Lon were pictures of white-faced despair when Tom finally finished reading the long message. But it was Dik who seemed to take it most to heart. He sank to the floor mumbling, only to spring erect suddenly with wild cries.

"Thank God for this message!" he cried. "It relieves me of my last doubt."

The others could see that there was more to it than what his words implied and stared at him expectantly.

"Fellows," said Dik, "I've been carrying an immense load on my shoulders, and I dared not even confide in you two, my closest friends. You remember that our space-ship passed over the city as we left the ground, and therefore over that glass-covered superman center? And you, Tom, remember that I was absent from the engine room for the first ten seconds?

"Can you guess where I was? I was at the auxiliary lock, which I had opened, with a hundred-pound can of fuel. I dropped it almost blindly as we soared over the city and had the satisfaction of seeing it plunge directly for that glass bubble."

He went on as both Tom and Lon were speechless: "I watched the effect — bits of glass actually pelted into the lock! That superman city is destroyed!"

Tom opened his mouth, but Dik went on: "I know what you're going to ask: How did I have the nerve to do such a thing when I didn't know what is in Buk's message? The answer is that I saw a Dark Moon in it from the first, and my analytical mind told me I was right!"

And for the first time, Tom had nothing to say against his companion's claims of a sharp mind.

THE END